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ABSTRACT

Through personal investigative reporting and compelling writing, H. G. Bissinger in "Friday Night Lights" (1991) explores the culture of high school football from a variety of perspectives including: students, parents, coaches, teachers, school boards, local politicians, community values regarding race, gender and education, regional history and the economy. Through powerful and evocative writing, he develops in depth the compelling issues and the personal sense of empathetic involvement with the players and coaches. This book represents a useful tool which teachers can use to provide students in high school with reading content with which they can identify, discuss, and write about in their journals or research in their own communities. (NH)

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Commentary on *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream*, by H. G. Bissinger (Harper Perennial, 1991) (Based on a presentation at the 1992 American Reading Forum, Sanibel, FL)

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As we find ourselves *Looking Around and Looking Ahead in the 21st Century*, we are exposed to and involved in a myriad of cultures. For many of us these cultures may be seen as international and distant, to be examined by reading, watching television, talking to visitors and, perhaps, personal travel. But there are local and personal cultures which affect the lives of our students and their families as well as our professional lives as teachers and encouragers of literacy. Through personal investigative reporting and compelling writing, Bessinger explores the culture of high school football from a remarkable variety of perspectives including: students, parents, coaches, teachers, school boards, local politicians, community values regarding race, gender and education, regional history and the economy.

Throughout the country high school athletics has become a dominate influence in the lives of an extraordinary number of students and their families. However, in many communities, both large and very small, it becomes central to the life of that community. Bissinger picked a community where this occurred--Odessa, Texas, home of the Permian High School Panthers whose football team has the best overall win-loss record in Texas history. He lived with the team, coaches, parents and community during the 1988 season and followed up the lives of several players for two years after

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the magic of the "Friday Night Lights," with all its dreams, expectations, and expanding self-concepts, faded into the personal realism of adult life.

Fifteen years before Bissinger began his exploration in Odessa, I experienced the same cultural adventure, but from a different perspective. The University of Texas--Permian Basin opened its doors for the first time and I was a member of the original faculty. That year Permian was the reigning champion of Texas high school football. It appears that the value of high school football and the way it permeates the lives of so many in the community has changed very little.

This book can be used by teacher educators and, perhaps, by high school teachers to explore many aspects of the role high school athletics plays in individual communities. The personal stories of students, as they live through the personal expectations of their parents, teachers, coaches, peers and themselves, leads us to explore racism, gender bias, anti-intellectualism, sexual stereotyping, self-concepts, community and state-wide politics, economic cycles, stages of human growth and development, among other relevant issues.

One section of the book focuses on the evolution of racial segregation issues which were addressed by court orders during the 1970's and 1980's in Odessa. At one time, a third high school existed which was on the proverbial "other side of the tracks" and was 99% minority and included 85% and 44% of the county's blacks and Hispanic respectively. Permian sports, "was the virtually exclusive preserve of white fans and white kids." (p. 102) How this issue evolved demonstrates the complex social, political and administrative interactions which are associated with high school sports programs.

Another remarkable issue was the role the "no pass, no play" rule in effect in

Texas played when challenged in the courts to decide if a team was eligible to continue in the state football playoffs. Pressures brought to bare on teachers to change grades so that top athletes can continue to play and policies which are designed to ensure support of athletic success all become integrated with state-wide political pressures. Can, or should, a judge decide what grade a student should receive?

Recalling a discussion with a parent of a high school athlete, Bissinger (1991) states:

> He saw the irresistible allure of high school sports, but he also saw an inevitable danger in adults' living vicariously through their young. And he knew of no candle that burned out more quickly than that of a high school athlete.
> "Athletics lasts for such a short period of time. It ends for people. But while it lasts, it creates this make-believe world where normal rules don't apply. We build this false atmosphere. When it's over and the harsh reality sets in, that's the real joke we play on people. . .Everybody wants to experience that superlative moment, and being an athlete can give you that. It's Camelot for them. But there's even life after it." (p. xiv)

Besides the powerful and evocative writing, the depth of development of the compelling issues, and the personal sense of empathetic involvement with the players and coaches, Bissinger has created a useful tool which teachers can use to provide students in high school with reading content with which they can identify, discuss, and write about in their journals or research in their own communities. While

there may be controversy, it may create passionate and focused writing which is authentic and relevant. As for new and experienced teachers, Bissinger provides an opportunity to examine personal values, professional values and district priorities as they relate to the role of high school athletics.

**Reference**

Bissinger, H. G. (1991). *Friday night lights: A town, a team, and a dream.* New York, NY: Harper Perennial.